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Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

GIRL WITH CHERRIES. BY AMBROGIO DE PREDIS

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## Ambrogio de Predis

BY MARRION WILCOX

**I**N the Monastery of S. Francisco at Milan, April 25, 1483, a contract was signed by the Prior and one other, representing the confraternity, and by three artists, namely, Leonardo da Vinci, Evangelista and "Johannes Ambrossius [Ambrogio] de Predis." The full text of that document occupies six pages of Beltrami's volume (Milan, 1919), in which are given the earliest references to Leonardo's life, his works, and, as in this instance, his association with men of mark. For our present purpose it is sufficient to say that the three artists agreed to make, or to have made under their direction (*fabricare seu fabricari facere et attendere et observare*), the architectural and pictorial decorations of a chapel altar. But documents given under the dates 1502, 1503 and 1506 show that Evangelista had died, that Leonardo "had absented himself" from the city, that the work had not been completed, and that Ambrogio de Predis was petitioning for additional payments. Finally, under date of October 23, 1508, we read that payment in full, including a substantial addition to the amount originally mentioned, was duly made, and the acknowledgment of this was ratified by Leonardo, who had returned meanwhile to take up his residence at Milan. Thus we have certain knowledge that Am-

brogio was associated with the great master at various times during twenty-five years, April 1483 to October 1508, at least.

Uncertainty as to the year of his birth and that of his death is admitted by Morelli, who states that until 1873-80, when he himself discovered and called public attention to De Predis, this excellent Milanese portrait painter was wholly unknown to students of Italian art. Morelli reasons, however, as follows: Ambrogio de Predis was employed by Leonardo Sforza, as his most favored portrait painter, as early as 1482. In 1482 he was, therefore, a finished artist, and we may infer that he was born between 1450 and 1460. His first lessons in art he may have received from the miniaturist, Christophorus de Predis; later, he may have come *under the influence of the School of Foppa* for a time. "Conscientious and careful painter," Morelli calls him, though he admits that De Predis's drawing and modelling are often defective, particularly in the representation of the hand. Further characteristics noted by the same writer, after examining the profile portraits which he first identified with Ambrogio de Predis, are summarized thus: (1) The dark edge of the upper eyelid runs in a straight line to its juncture with the lower lid, from which it is separated by a



PORTRAIT OF F. DI BARTOLOMMEO ARCHINTO. BY AMBROGIO DE PREDIS IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON.

streak of light. (2) Each eyelash is indicated separately. (3) The contour of the upper lip is stiff, while the under lip is full and heavy. (4) The bridge of the nose is marked by a sharp line of light. (5) The heavy mass of loose hair is touched with separate strokes of light. (6) Such details as the collar of the Golden Fleece in the portrait of Maximilian are painted in the manner of a miniaturist.

Venturi, anti-Ambrosian, in the latest volume of his *Storia dell'Arte Italiana*, speaks of Ambrogio de Predis as the oldest among the pupils of Leonardo in Lombardy; then adding that, in regard to the paintings by De Predis before Leonardo's sojourn in Milan, we have no information; but that subsequently De Predis worked, as I have mentioned above, in association with Leonardo, "his guest, and copied the *Virgin of the Rocks*." I cite the eminent critic's statement without expressing either assent

or dissent, since a discussion of the *Virgin of the Rocks* at present would take us too far afield. It seems also my duty to cite the further statement that when, no longer sustained by direct Vincian example, De Predis painted for the wings of that altar-piece the two angels playing on musical instruments, he descended to a lower level, giving to the faces flesh that resembles stucco-work, spotted with livid shadows. Venturi sees the Leonardesque influence in Ambrogio's portrait of Francisco Privio and in his portrait of a youth in the Carrara Academy; but when studying the portrait of Archinto in the National Gallery, London, he appears to be fascinated only by the young man's right hand, with its "distorted fingers and knuckles swollen as though by gout."

Both Venturi and Morelli, then, lay stress upon Ambrogio's defective representation of the hands of his sitters. But an interesting circumstance not mentioned by either of those critics—a circumstance which, indeed, appears to have been overlooked by other students in the same field hitherto—is this: The hands in question do not exhibit such faults of drawing as were characteristic (I mean not vaguely, but precisely) of any school of painting or which appear in the works of contemporaneous artists. They are, in a word, idiosyncratic.

The most striking example of this idiosyncrasy, the hand in the portrait of F. di Bartolommeo Archinto which bears the number 1665 in the London National Gallery, makes another claim upon our special attention, for Archinto's "distorted fingers" hold a small scroll inscribed with the date and Ambrogio de Predis's monogram: *1494 Ano 20 and A M Pred.*

Let us take this as a starting point and proceed to an examination of the half-length, full-face portrait which is numbered P 91-1 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and now attributed correctly to De Predis, although it was for a time, as in the Museum's 1903 catalogue of paintings ascribed to Leon-



Courtesy The Ehrich Galleries

MOTHER AND CHILD. BY AMBROGIO DE PREDIS





ANGEL PLAYING A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT. ONE OF TWO PANELS BY AMBROGIO DE PREDIS FOR LEONARDO DA VINCI'S "MADONNA OF THE ROCKS" IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

ardo, and was then characterized by Sir Charles Robinson as a "most admirable and unique picture" which "should be referred to Leonardo's early period." The distinguished author of the *Storia dell'Arte Italiana* (p. 1032 of the volume published in 1915) gives this portrait to Boltraffio; and I must say that the right hand of this young woman appears, on first view, to resemble the hands of the Chatsworth (Duke of Devonshire) Boltraffio portrait and of Boltraffio's *San Luigi*, formerly in the Stroganoff col-

lection at Petrograd. On closer study, however, the observer will become aware of peculiar faults of drawing precisely like the distortion noted in the drawing of the fingers of the portrait of Archinto, except that here the misplaced joints in the hand above the salver of fruit are inconspicuous. In fact, the De Predis idiosyncrasy in this particular should be regarded as a positive bit of evidence confirming the Museum's attribution, rather than Venturi's.

Again, this idiosyncrasy appears in the beautiful painting of the *Mother and Child*, here reproduced. Here the fingers of the drooping right hand of the Mother recall immediately and unmistakably (and in their positions as well as in their shape) the characteristic hand placed above the salver of fruit in the Metropolitan Museum's De Predis; the wrists, moreover, both right and left, in modeling and the sharp line of light separating them from the sleeve, plainly show identical perception and the same habitual representation in the two pictures. If De Predis had inscribed his monogram, in the manner of a miniaturist, upon the salver of fruit in one of the pictures and upon the clasp of the book in the other, the authorship of the two paintings would be more obvious, indeed, but not more indubitable. This I assert the more emphatically because the flower-like quality of the hands in the picture of the *Mother and Child* will be apt to suggest a wholly different view, if one trusts his first impressions too easily. Let us ask, for example, whether the drawing of these hands, completing so delicately the rhythmic lines and lighted surfaces of this—the more interesting—panel, does not suggest Borgognone's facility, manifested in many paintings and especially in the *Annunciation* (Lodi, Church of the Incoronata). To me it does clearly suggest Borgognone's exceptional talent in this respect; but of course this *Mother and Child* cannot for a moment be confused with the works of that member of the school of Foppa, since here the eyes, the expression of the

mouth, and the coloring of the Mother are like those of the National Gallery's portrait of Archinto, while Borgognone's Madonnas are all of the melancholy, morbid, lachrymose type. I think it probable that portraiture, in order to express more freely in an ideal creation certain Leonardesque motives, consciously imitated the fluent expressiveness of hands in the pictures by that other Ambrogio—Ambrogio da Fossano, called Borgognone. Nothing could have been more natural. Let us remember this: The angel in Borgognone's *Annunciation*, which I have mentioned, is so much like the angel in Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* that one fairly expects to come upon other examples and striking instances of borrowing; and this would hardly be limited to the borrowing of Leonardesque motives by Borgognone, since there was often reciprocity in such favors. We would, therefore, have expected—and here we have found—a striking instance of borrowing from Borgognone by Leonardo's oldest pupil.

His lifelong habit of collaboration may in a measure account for De Predis's aptitude in reproducing, with marvelous verisimilitude, some of the distinguishing characteristics of the works of other artists. It is evident that he gained the power of seeing objects, models, sitters, whenever it suited his purpose to do so, nearly as other masters saw them—almost the power to think, at will, the best art-thoughts of his peers or superiors in any Milanese art-group. His collaboration with Leonardo has already been mentioned; and we hear that in 1494 Maximilian commanded him to engrave, *with two collaborators*, the dies for the new imperial coinage; and again, in 1498, there was an undertaking by him, *with his brother Bernardino*, to furnish the Emperor with a wall-hanging (not a tapestry) of six pieces of black embroidered velvet, the cartoon to be designed by Ambrogio (see Motta, "Archivio Storico Lombardo," 1893, pp. 972 seq.) The recital merely of the lists of his known works has a way all its own of evoking, for those

who love Cinquecento art as Edward FitzGerald famously loved his old room's fireside in winter, the shades of Vincenzo Foppa, Boltraffio, Borgognone, Leonardo and Leonardo's younger disciples. Even in the last century, soon after De Predis had been discovered, such lists included the portrait of Francesco Brivio, in the Poldi collection at Milan, where it was attributed to Foppa; the portrait of a fair-haired young man which belonged to a Milanese family and attributed to Leonardo; portraits of the Emperor Maximilian and the Empress Bianca Maria Sforza, pen-and-ink sketches of which Gio. Marco Cavalli in the Academy at Venice long passed as Leonardo's drawings; a *Saint Sebastian* belonging to Dr. Frizonni at Milan, and for a time passing as a Boltraffio; in the same collection a portrait, in profile, once regarded, even



PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG WOMAN (OFTEN ERRONEOUSLY DESCRIBED AS BEATRICE D'ESTE). ATTRIBUTED TO AMBROGIO DE PREDIS. AMBROSIANA GALLERY, MILAN

by the Florentine Academy, as the work of Leonardo; and the profile portrait of a young lady (the so-called Beatrice d'Este), in the Ambrosiana at Milan, which Venturi still regards as the work of some other pupil, some unnamed younger pupil, of Leonardo. He writes positively: "To be excluded from the works of Ambrogio de Predis is the female portrait of the Ambrosiana." Morelli, however, almost as confidently, placed it among De Predis's early works, with this observation that it is of about the same

period as the portrait of Gian Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Count of Pavia, belonging to Count Porro at Milan. He adds: "Whom this attractive portrait represents I do not pretend to say; it is *not* Beatrice d'Este." The face does, in fact, to me, suggest Melzi's *Pomona* and his *Colombina*; and so I should name the unnamed younger pupil of Leonardo, Melzi. But Morelli's attribution of the picture to De Predis will stand, unless evidence can be found that any one of the younger pupils imitated the De Predis characteristics.



## Keeper of Songs

BY JOSEPH AUSLANDER

Keeper of Songs,  
When the spirit longs  
To soar and sing, dawn-heralding,  
Keeper of Songs,  
Unbind the thongs  
That hold me—let me sing.

Keeper of Songs  
To whom belongs  
The silken string for treasuring,  
Keeper of Songs,  
Against all wrongs  
Release me—let me sing.

Keeper of Songs  
In silver throngs,  
Lord and King of carolling,  
Keeper of Songs,  
Unbind the thongs  
That hold me—let me sing.